

The Power of a Single Word

2/24/2020

In the eleventh hour, with full information, the Wisconsin Dairy Alliance changed our minds and helped stop a proposed livestock siting bill. We are thankful we did.

The WDA was formed by dairy producers and industry professionals for one reason: When legislation is on the table, it is critical to have a statewide organization that is looking out for CAFOs. Too often industry groups tend to gloss over critical issues that harm CAFOs in the name of stakeholder unity at the state capital. The pressure to bow to the “group think” is immense. As a result, we have witnessed a “selling out” of CAFOs by the very people hired to defend them. This unfortunate scenario played out last week with the proposed livestock siting legislation. After some serious introspection, we concluded that we could not support this harmful bill.

For months, WDA, other organizations and legislators worked tirelessly on the proposed livestock siting bill. It contained many beneficial changes that would have helped the industry, and lessen the burden on local governments. It also contained a serious flaw. WDA applauds Sen. Howard Marklein for allowing additional time to work on a bill that stakeholders hoped would find a balance, ensuring our cheese processors have the supply of milk they need to prosper.

Along with many others, WDA supported the bill as it came out of committee just two weeks ago. But there was a very odd single word change that kept us up at night — deep in the proposed bill, the word “and” was replaced with the word “or.” This one-word change was exposed for what it was — a very clear way to stop farms from expanding via local zoning without requiring any finding that state standards are inadequate. In fact, a letter dated Feb. 11, 2020, from the Counties and Towns Associations to their members validated our fear. They wrote frankly about the proposed bill: “... A local government may use its zoning authority to limit the size of livestock facilities.” Our legal experts all agreed it would be impossible to expand an existing farm in a zone that capped the size of livestock farms.

That single, very small word had a huge impact on your ability to grow your farm in the future.

We are standing shoulder to shoulder with Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC), whose 3,800 members include dairy producers, cheese makers, food producers and farm equipment manufacturers. WDA agrees with the testimony given by WMC at the hearing where they noted the single word change would allow local governments to effectively zone-out larger dairy farms.

We listened to those individuals who voiced the potential impact these decisions make on their lives, like dairy farmer and Polk County Supervisor Brad Olson. In speaking on behalf of a handful of his hometown farmers, he told lawmakers the proposed bill as written would mean “local units of government will not allow large agriculture to exist in their local areas.”

“I see this firsthand as over the last several months our County passed a moratorium on swine CAFOs,” he said. “As time moved on, individuals and local towns now want *all* large agriculture stopped ... If local units of government have this control, agriculture in Wisconsin will soon dry up and blow away.”

Such a premonition doesn't just affect farmers. It would affect thousands of employers and employees across the state that rely on livestock production as part of their businesses.

Our industry is under siege. A four-year milk price recession, protracted trade wars, anti-animal agriculture activists and a punitive regulatory climate has our industry worn thin. A shocking number of dairy farmers have left the industry, leaving a milk production deficit in Wisconsin. Other states are expanding, and Wisconsin is beginning to atrophy. The remaining farmers must be able to expand to fill that void. If not, it will result in irreparable damage to our cheese industry and the thousands of small business that support it.

Times are tough. Our industry needs tough leadership. At WDA you can expect one thing, we will never sell you out in the name of political expedience.